Opinion: Funding for public lands remains in jeopardy

Anna Peterson The Colorado Sun
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Over 150 county commissioners, mayors, city, and town council members representing 46 communities from all 11 Western states recently sent a letter to their congressional delegations urging them to fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF).

Twenty-two of the 46 communities were from Colorado, and 12 of the 19 full Colorado county commissions and/or city councils signed onto the letter and sent individual letters to the Colorado delegation.

Many of Colorado’s summer visitors are traveling to our great state because of our beautiful public lands, which are supported by the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

The LWCF has been funding the conservation and preservation of, as well as access to, federal, state and local public lands and waters for over 52 years. The LWCF draws funds from offshore oil and gas royalties, not taxpayers, to provide financial support through grants dedicated to expansion, development, and improvement of national parks, forests, monuments, rivers, lakes, wildlife refuges, community parks, trails, and ball fields.

In Colorado, these lands include state gems like Colorado National Monument, as well as Rocky Mountain, Great Sand Dunes and Mesa Verde national parks.

While $900 million has been deposited into the LWCF each year since the fund’s creation, Congress usually funnels this money elsewhere, leaving many key conservation projects without funding.

Over time, $22 billion has been diverted to other, unknown uses leaving inadequate funding for conservation projects. Funding for the LWCF was originally approved for 25 years, was reauthorized for another 25 years in 1990, then was reauthorized for three years in 2015 and expired on Sept. 30, 2018.
LWCF was in limbo for over four months, amounting to a loss of more than $300 million for conservation and recreation projects across the country.

Congress permanently reauthorized the LWCF in March of this year with overwhelming bipartisan support in both the House of Representatives and Senate by the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act.

Yet despite Congress’ step in the right direction, President Trump and Secretary of Interior David Bernhardt’s proposed Fiscal Year 2020 budget refuses to fund LWCF at its full $900 million and instead proposes practically eliminating LWCF funding, directly impacting communities nationwide.

The over 150 letter signers, representing 1.25 million year-round residents and nearly 56 million annual visitors, recognize the importance of adequate funding for public lands conservation, preservation, enhancement and expansion.

Although pleased with the passage of permanent reauthorization, the signers of this letter urge Congress to further support America’s public lands system by advancing full and dedicated funding for the LWCF.

These 46 communities and many more like them are inextricably linked to the public lands that surround them. Community residents and business owners rely on public lands visitation and exploration for economic success and cultural vitality. The LWCF supports and enhances public lands, and as such, these communities.

The Land and Water Conservation Fund has been indispensable in public lands conservation in the United States since its passage in 1964 and has since increased the conservation and health of public lands and waters in every state and nearly every county in the United States.

These LWCF funded projects help support the $887 billion outdoor recreation industry, and the economies of our Western mountain communities.

It’s time — Congress needs to include full, permanent, mandatory funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund as part of the bipartisan deal on spending caps, the debt limit and FY2020 appropriations.

They should seize this opportunity to support our mountain communities and public lands for all Americans.
Anna Peterson, Executive Director of The Mountain Pact, is based in Durango, Colorado. Founded in 2014, The Mountain Pact is an effort to educate, mobilize, and empower mountain towns with outdoor recreation-based economies in the American West around federal policy.